

Christ in/and the Old Testament

On what basis and/or in what way(s) is it appropriate to read the Old Testament Christologically?

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The question that appears above as a subtitle is one about hermeneutics. What I mean is that we come to gain insight into things (texts or people or events) in light of the convictions, questions, and experiences that we bring to them. This need not mean we impose these convictions, questions, or experiences on them; these are our ways into gaining insight on the things in themselves. Indeed, by a feedback process that eventual insight into the things in themselves may broaden or correct our convictions and questions, and our understanding of our experience. Convictions about Christ are one set of convictions in light of which we may read the Old Testament.

In turn, there are two broad aspects to “Christ and the Old Testament.” One involves using the Old Testament to illumine Christ. I will just make one comment on that. The hermeneutical process involved in using the Old Testament to illumine Christ initially means letting Christ set the agenda. Matthew 1:18 – 2:23 provides an example. A series of incidents associated with Jesus’ birth and childhood raise questions that the Old Testament helps Matthew answer. Christ sets the agenda. But if all Old Testament scripture is inspired by God and thus useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16), then this hermeneutical process also has to involve letting the Old Testament broaden the agenda. To find out who Christ is and what is his significance for us, we read the whole Old Testament.

The other aspect to “Christ and the Old Testament” involves using Christ to illumine the Old Testament. The phrase “reading the Old Testament Christologically” suggests a focus lying here.

Now the New Testament might suggest a number of starting points for a Christological reading of the Old Testament. The most familiar one involves seeing Jesus as the Messiah promised there. Others involve seeing him as a priest or prophet or servant or “human-like figure” (“Son of Man”). There are various problems in starting with the idea of the Messiah. Within the Old Testament the person of the anointed Israelite king is of rather ambiguous theological significance. Having kings was not God’s idea and it was something God felt ambivalent about. A related problem is that the hope of a new anointed king is rather marginal to the Old Testament. It is often argued that it is a theme of increasing significance in the Old Testament, more prominent in the Old Testament’s final canonical form, but this is mostly wishful thinking by Christians. In particular, there is no evidence that the Psalter was designed to be read messianically – that is, that by the time the Psalter reached its final form, people who used the psalms about the king would naturally apply them to the Messiah. While there is a strand of promise in books such as Jeremiah that thinks in these terms, in contrast to that, Isaiah 40 – 55 democratizes Yhwh’s commitment

to David as expressed in a passage such as Psalm 89; that would mean the whole people could “claim” the psalms about the king. Again, Chronicles (written in the Second Temple period) shows how it is quite possible to remember and rejoice in the way Yhwh related to the kings without implying that one need be looking for a Messiah. Its readers might even be remembering that with sadness, so that the kingship psalms become implicit laments. There are a number of attitudes to kingship in the Second Temple period, and no direct reason to link the Psalter with any one of them.

From a New Testament perspective, Jesus is much too hesitant about being called Messiah for this to be a useful starting point for understanding him in relation to the Old Testament. And of course Jesus was not actually the anointed Israelite king. The New Testament does take up kingship and priesthood and turn them into metaphors that contribute to an understanding of Jesus, but they are of limited significance in this connection. There is only a partial overlap between the position and vocation of the Israelite king and the position and vocation of Jesus, and to say he is king and priest is not the most illuminating thing that can be said about him. To judge from his own attitude, seeing him as the servant in Isaiah or the human-like figure in Daniel (or as a prophet) is more illuminating. More significantly for our present purpose, because there is only a limited overlap between the application to Christ of the metaphor of king or priest, reading Old Testament references to kingship or priesthood in light of Christ obscures them as much as it illuminates them.

Jesus’ hesitation about being called the Messiah links with the fact that there is insufficient basis for arguing from the Old Testament that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus does not do the kind of things that the Old Testament says the future David will do. This reflects how the logic of linking Jesus to the Old Testament moves backwards not forwards. Christological reading of the Old Testament issues from faith in Jesus. After the resurrection his followers, now convinced that he was Savior and Lord, looked back to the Old Testament to discover what that meant, as he himself encouraged them to do. The Old Testament became a Christological resource for them. But Old Testament references to a future David do not point forward to Jesus. They are not like the words in 1 Kings 13 that point forward to Josiah. And neither do other Old Testament motifs such as the servant or the human-like figure, even though they are illuminating with hindsight. They do not in themselves point forward to Jesus.

Thus a Christological reading of the texts about the king or the humanlike figure skews an understanding of their inherent meaning as much as it illuminates them. It hinders our seeing what the Holy Spirit was saying in these texts when inspiring them and hinders our seeing much of what the Holy Spirit would want us to see on the basis of these texts.

A better starting point for approaching the question of a Christological reading of the Old Testament is the person of God.

I begin with the fact that Yhwh is God. That Old Testament statement is one that the church and the Jewish community need to make if they are to be faithful to their scriptures. Conversely, God is Yhwh. That Old Testament statement is also one that the church and the Jewish community need to make if they are to be faithful to their scriptures. If God is Yhwh and Yhwh is God, it follows that the words “God” and “Yhwh” have different

meanings but the same reference, or different connotations but the same denotation. (The sense-reference distinction and the connotation-denotation distinction are matters of controversy in philosophy of language, but I assume that they can be defended.) They are like the terms “John Goldingay” and “David Allan Hubbard Professor of Old Testament.” In each case, both expressions refer to the same person, but they have different connotations. There is only one God and this God’s name is Yhwh. Yhwh is the only God.

Further, God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is not quite a statement that the scriptures make, but it is a legitimate inference from the New Testament and thus a statement that the church needs to make if it is to be faithful to its scriptures. And conversely, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are God. That, too, is not quite a statement that the scriptures make, but it is a legitimate inference from the New Testament and thus another statement that the church needs to make if it is to be faithful to its scriptures. It follows from those two statements that in Christian conviction the word “God” and the phrase “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” have different meanings but the same reference, different connotations but the same denotation.

And since Yhwh is God, and Father Son, and Holy Spirit are God, it follows that in Christian conviction Yhwh is the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It then follows that whenever you read about Yhwh in the Old Testament, you are reading about God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

That is an interpretive theological observation, not an exegetical one. Many exegetical statements are theological statements in the sense that they themselves make statements about God, such as “Yhwh is a great King above all gods.” But these are the text’s own theological statements. To say “Yhwh is God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” is an interpretive theological statement in the sense that draws from the scriptures as a whole an inference about objective truth, but it is not a statement that anyone reading the Old Testament by itself would make.

If Yhwh is God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it follows that Christians can read the Old Testament Christologically in the sense that every time it says something about Yhwh, they know it is talking about Christ. So (for instance) Christ is one of the persons of the Godhead who is “a great King above all gods.”

This is again an interpretive theological statement, not an exegetical one. It is appropriate and important as a theological statement and it signals the inappropriateness of setting up a disjunction between who Christ is and who Yhwh is (for instance, as if Christ were someone who forgives and Yhwh were someone who does not). Yhwh and Christ have the same personality profile.

In light of the fact that Yhwh is God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it is not surprising that John says that “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ,” as the one who “is close to the Father’s heart” and “has made him known” in the sense of making him visible (John 1:17-18). Christ shares in the personhood of Yhwh, who is self-defined as grace and truth (Exod 34:6) and who thus naturally embodies who Yhwh has always been for Israel. Likewise it is not surprising that Hebrews begins from the

assumption that God spoke identically through the prophets and by his Son (Heb 1:1-3); the former was scattergun, but the content of the two was the same.

Reading the Old Testament Christologically then means letting who Christ is give us clues to a right reading of the way the Old Testament talks about God. This is not a reading that adds new meanings to the Old Testament, nor is it one that approves some things the Old Testament says about God and rejects others, but it is one that enables us to see aspects of what is there in the way the Old Testament talks about God that we might otherwise miss.

The fundamental example is this. Christians commonly see the Old Testament story as the story of a wrathful God at work, whereas they do not see Jesus in these terms. Jesus could not then be the embodiment of this God. Jesus is the embodiment of the God of grace and truth; Jesus is the one who sacrifices himself for the world; Jesus is the one who pays the price for the world's sin. But knowing that makes one re-read the Old Testament story and see that this is the nature of God's relationship with the world and with Israel as the Old Testament portrays it. Through the Old Testament story God was paying the price for sin, bearing its consequences, refusing to let it break the relationship. Through the Old Testament story God was making the sacrifices that enabled a relationship to continue. Only because God continually took up the cross in an act of self-denial did God's relationship with the world and with Israel continue. Thus the cross on Golgotha was the logical end term of the way God had been through the Old Testament story. It would be possible to see that implication of the Old Testament story without knowing about the cross on Golgotha, but that cross makes it easier to see.

The basis for such a Christological reading of the Old Testament thus lies in what Christians know about Jesus. Its vindication lies in its capacity actually to illumine the Old Testament – not to impose a meaning on the Old Testament but to draw attention to a meaning that anyone can then see.